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ABSTRACT

John Dewey employed the phrase "water-tight compartments" to mark deficiencies of integration within an individual's personality. For Dewey, the self is complex, but a strong personality integrates its various habits so that they reinforce rather than conflict with one another. Dewey's focus on this problem of personality has relevance for teachers in the everyday world, in the classroom, and in the field of composition. Dewey's ideas can help teachers understand their own struggles for integration, the inability to bring the varied activities of teacher, father, and friend together so that they can energize one another. Dewey described biological, social, and political factors which promote a separation of personality in the modern world. He also analyzed certain habits of mind which have an affinity with an old-fashioned individualism dating back at least seven centuries to medieval religion. Dewey criticized this brand of individualism by showing how Americans associate it with living in isolation and identify it with the self-reliance of frontier people. The upshot of Dewey's critique is his discussion of democracy, the essence of which (in his view) is community. According to Dewey, all of the great modern advances have been cooperative affairs. The modern lack of integration has two causes: (1) modern life is too weighted toward isolation; and (2) modern life is victimized by professionalization. Thus, many teachers are driven to experimentation in the classroom, where they have the most control, and attempt to create a community along Deweyan lines by overcoming the water-tight compartments that separate human beings. (HB)

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EXPLORING WATER-TIGHT COMPARTMENTS

By employing the phrase "water-tight compartments", John Dewey walks in the footprints of an eighteenth century romantic tradition. Johann Gottried Herder, a century and half earlier, had used the phrase to criticize faculty psychologies, like Immanuel Kant's, which divided reason from sense, intellect from imagination, soul from mind (see Patrick Gardner, *Nineteenth Century Philosophy*, New York: The Free Press, 1969, p.6). Dewey, in ways similar to Herder, uses water-tight compartments to mark deficiencies of integration within an individual's personality. I have found three instances of the phrase in Dewey's writings.

In *Human Nature and Conduct*, published in 1922, Dewey discusses the failure to allow our various impulses and habits to inform one another.

> There is no one ready-made self behind activities. There are complex, unstable, opposing attitudes, habits, impulses which gradually come to terms with one another...[even if] only by means of a distribution of inconsistencies which keeps them in water-tight compartments, giving them separate turns or tricks in action (*Human Nature & Conduct*, p.138).

For Dewey, the self is complex and shifting, but a strong personality integrates its various habits so they re-inforce rather than ignore or conflict with one another.

Dewey's next use of the phrase water-tight compartments occurs in *The Public & Its Problems* which appeared five years later in 1927.

> A man may be one thing as a church member and another thing as a member of the business community. The difference may be carried as if in water-tight compartments, or it may become such a division as to entail internal conflict (*The Public & Its Problems*, p.191).

Dewey tells us that when our roles as business man, church member, and parent are kept apart, we miss an important opportunity to

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relate different aspects of our lives, to see ways in which church membership might effect our parenting, ways in which parenting might effect the conduct of our business.

The final reference I have found is from *Experience and Education*, published nearly a decade later in 1936.

> Almost everyone has had occasion to look back upon his school days and wonder what has become of the knowledge he was supposed to have amassed during his years of schooling.... ...One trouble is that the subject-matter in question was learned in isolation; it was put, as it were, in a water-tight compartment (*Experience & Education*, p.48).

Dewey explains why we are able to master lots of materials to pass school exams but later on have trouble recalling them. Dewey's explanation is that we have stored this information in inaccessible compartments because we were discouraged from relating these materials to our broader, non-school interests.

In each of these uses of the phrase water-tight compartments Dewey refers to problems of personality-- failures to integrate habits or functions or pieces of information. But the idea of water-tight compartments is more fundamental to Dewey's thought than this focus on problems of personality suggests. His extensive writings about democratic society, education, and loss of community reflect his attention to similar problems of integration at the social rather than just the individual level. Dewey is concerned with integration for groups as well as persons.

WATER-TIGHT COMPARMENTS AND MY PERSONAL STRUGGLES

Why am I focussing on something as apparently esoteric as Dewey's use of the phrase water-tight compartments? I do so because of its relevance to my own struggles in three areas-- in the everyday world, in the classroom, in the field of rhetoric and composition.

First, on the personal level I struggle to figure out why I am divided, unable to bring an integrated self to my roles as father, son, husband, friend, and colleague. Many of my roles conspire against the shared responsibility or equivalence which successful relationships require. My mother wants to keep me a babe; my son

designates me a hero; my students demand an omniscent oracle. In addition, my own habits promote isolation, betraying my inability to relate to others. Sociologist Philip Slater helps me understand that by having my own TV, my own car, my own phone, and my own country retreat, I minimize the time I must spend negotiating with others about things we have in common (*The Pursuit of Loneliness*). Like many Americans, according to Slater, I try to avoid people since I cannot relate to them.

Second, as a teacher I struggle to create a community in my philosophy classroom, to break down the compartments that separate students from me and from each other as well as the compartments that isolate students' personal concerns from my course's philosophic ones. In this regard, Dewey's discussions of community, communication, and equality are helpful in building the classroom I desire, a classroom attempting to integrate students' academic and everyday lives, reduce the separation of teachers as experts from students as naive empty vessels. (For Dewey's discussion about student "ownership" of school materials, see *Democracy & Education*, pp.154-188).

Third, in the field of rhetoric and composition I struggle to understand the best way to teach writing. Year after year I follow versions of the current debate between David Bartholomae and Peter Elbow. Should I teach writing skills which can be applied in all writing situations or should I teach the idiosyncracies of philosophic discourse? In this connection, Dewey's work is also relevant. My reading is that Dewey would side with those who highlight writing of the sort Peter Elbow calls "personal" writing, the sort which would allow different disciplinary majors to talk with one another and develop more meaningful community.

These are my reasons for discussing Dewey's use of the phrase water-tight compartments. In what follows I will not directly address issues of education or rhetoric and composition. Rather, I will focus primarily on ways Dewey helps me understand my own struggle for integration, in short, to understand the unintegrated quality of my life, my inability to bring my activities as teacher, researcher, father, and friend together so they energize one another, so my different selves can approve and support one another.

I now turn to specifics in Dewey's work which speak to the sources of my dilemma.

WHAT LEADS TO WATER-TIGHT COMPARTMENTS?

Biological, Social, and Political Factors

At the outset let me mention a few biological, social, and political factors which, according to Dewey, promote separation. For example, Dewey sees in our biology a tendency to separate, a disposition to isolate, to be so proud of our distinctions that we build protective moats around ourselves (*Experience and Nature*, p.331).

Dewey also cites social causes of separation, in particular, our culture's increasing reliance on specialization. From Dewey's point of view, specialization, despite its short-term efficiency, tends to compartmentalize people by making it more difficult to have common experiences, to step into one another's shoes. Specialization also weakens character by encouraging inconsistency, by forcing our habits to alternate with one another rather than reinforce one another (*Human Nature and Conduct*, pp.38-39).

In addition, separation is promoted by political factors, especially the complexity and size of modern nation states. Underlying much of Dewey's thought is a concern for face-to-face relationships. Dewey argues that recovery of community depends upon revitalized small, local groups because such intimate groups can provide the stability and attachment which happiness requires. "Democracy," writes Dewey, "must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community" (*The Public & Its Problems*, p.213). Although face-to-face, small-town relationships are not utopias, their stability at times sliding into stagnation, it is clear we live in a society in which it is easier to satisfy our need for separation than to satisfy our need for communion. This is true, for Dewey, because the social and political actions whose consequences impinge upon us are so remote and complex, we are unable to locate others who are equally affected and with whom we might find common purpose. As an example, Dewey cites farmers who, during the inflationary

period of World War I, bought land and machinery on credit but went bankrupt after the war because of lower food prices. According to Dewey, these farmers could not foresee the consequences of the world events affecting their businesses, nor could they clearly identify those similarly affected and with whom they might have joined forces to prevent ruin (*The Public & Its Problems*, p.129). Dewey's solution to the problems of the complex nation state calls for greater application of scientific method to social inquiry and greater dissemination of the results of such inquiry.

THE ASSUMPTIONS OF OLD-FASHIONED INDIVIDUALISM

Although these biological, social, and political facts to which Dewey directs our attention are important, what helps me more clearly understand my own struggle for integration is Dewey's analysis of certain habits of mind, habits which Dewey might call the exhortations of old-fashioned individualism. In fact, these habits are so dominating and pervasive in my life that I shudder at the energy and insight I need to alter them. What are these habits of mind and how do they keep me from an integrated life?

From all corners of my middle-class world I hear imperatives to compete for myself, get A's, find a good job, rise to the top and experience the personal happiness, respect, and glory which follow. In fact, I recognize the same marching orders in the eyes of my students. They want the best grades in order to get the best jobs so they can earn a lot of money or the equivalent in personal honor and prestige. Like Spinoza who tried materialism and found it wanting, my own taste of the fruits of individual triumph suggests that they too are wanting. What has gone wrong? Perhaps I have not competed hard enough or earned large enough rewards or fought on the right battle fields. Perhaps.... But I suspect that to compete harder would only put me in the position of a drug-addict pursuing larger and larger fixes for my habit. What Dewey does for me is to present an alternative way to conduct my life and to suggest that my current way of going at the world is not inevitable. Dewey shows me that the exhortations for personal success which put me in a water-tight compartment, isolating me, leading me to disconnect

personal and communal interests, are particular responses to particular economic and political problems and not ineluctable features of the human condition.

What are the sources of these exhortations and how do they isolate me? Dewey believes that the root of old-fashioned individualism goes back at least seven centuries. (For Dewey's discussion of the history of individualism, see *The Public & Its Problems*, especially ch.III, and *Individualism, Old & New*, chapter V.) He suggests that the spiritual source of individualism is found in medieval religion with its emphasis on the soul and on our separate, personal salvations. The industrial revolution, according to Dewey, gave a secular turn to individualism but continued the idea, through its emphasis on private property, that rewards are instrinsically personal (*Individualism, Old & New*, p.75). The central figure in Dewey's account of individualism's secular turn is John Locke. Locke claims that each of us has a right to life, liberty, and property, and that each of us, on our own, can determine how to act in our own best interests. Further, according to Dewey, Locke's idea of individual rights joined forces with the *laissez-faire* doctrine of economics to justify all-out competition in the market place. Despite the absence of any deliberate social or economic planning, an "invisible hand of Providence" would insure that the best goods would be produced at the cheapest prices, and, as a result, all competitors would receive their just deserts and the entire commonwealth would prosper.

Dewey completes his account by suggesting that these economic and political doctrines were reinforced by the psychologies of Locke and Descartes. In both psychologies, mind was presented apart from context. Each of us, in isolation and confronting experience independently, could arrive at truth. Although Locke thought the building blocks of truth were sensible impressions whereas Descartes thought they were ideas perceived "clearly and distinctly," both men thought minds could work autonomously and transcend personal circumstances. In these religious, political, economic, and psychological theories we have the roots of the water-tight compartments which, in the late twentieth century, keep my various roles unconnected and keep my isolated from others.

DEWEY'S CRITIQUE OF OLD-FASHIONED INDIVIDUALISM AND LAISSEZ-FAIRE ECONOMICS

Dewey begins his evaluation of old-fashioned individualism by criticizing its foundations. From his point of view the problem with the doctrine of individual rights is that its proponents failed to recognize the particular historical context in which it was fashioned. With the rise of merchant and manufacturing classes, individual rights were a means of loosening the mercantile restrictions standing in the way of fluid capital, labor, and trade. Generalizing from their attack on feudal institutions, reformers like James Mill and Jeremy Bentham saw liberty as freedom from all institutional restraints. They failed to honor the cohesive forces, the stable objects of community allegience which enabled liberals to collectively demand their individual rights. Old-fashioned individualism made it seem as if people could exist in isolation, that the battle was between individuals and society, between personal impulses and collective constraints. To the contrary, Dewey argues that people are always in associative behavior with others and that it is never a choice of going one's own way or joining the crowd. The choice, according to Dewey, is always about which associations to join and the effect of these associations upon our personal potentials.

> Individuals find themselves cramped and depressed by absorption of their potentialities in some mode of association which has been institutionalized and become dominant. They may think they are clamoring for a purely personal liberty, but what they are doing is to bring into being a greater liberty to share in other associations.... Life has been impoverished, not by a predominance of 'society' in general over individuality, but by a domination of one form of association, the family, clan, church, economic institutions, over other actual and possible forms (*Public & Its Problems*, pp. 193-194).

People mistake their desire for more fulfilling associations with a desire for freedom from all associations. This, according to Dewey, is especially true of contemporary American society which identifies individualism with the self-reliance of frontier people. But this,

for Dewey, is doubly misleading. Although pioneers dramatically exhibited self-reliance, their individual work took place in the context of communal religious, political, and social experiences. Second, although today's business and political leaders speak about the value of private initiative, we, in fact, live in a world which is anything but private. For example, although Henry Ford is considered the founder of the automobile industry, Henry Ford did not invent the automobile industry by himself. It was the result of the work of generations of laborers and technicians. Henry Ford simply appropriated these collective efforts for his private purpose and gain. Although we still talk to ourselves in terms of personal reward and initiative, the reality of modern life is that all our actions are tied to the actions of others. Failure to bring our ideas of initiative into harmony with actual practice leads, in Dewey's terms, to an individual "divided within himself" (*Individualism, Old & New*, p.50).

Just as Dewey is critical of the idea that individuals achieve success by independently pursuing their own interests, so he is critical of the view that freedom of thought is a matter of self-reflection, a state of mind which can be achieved in isolation. To the contrary, for Dewey, isolated individuals off by themselves may engage in fantasy but not free thinking. For Dewey, freedom of thought means acting on one's ideas and disseminating them. It means criticism and testing, using thought to modify the environment and challenge the behavior of others.

The upshot of Dewey's outline and criticism of our notions of individualism are encapsulated in his discussion of democracy, and Dewey's discussion of democracy offers me further insight into my struggle to lead an integrated life. The popular notion of democracy, <u>my</u> idea of democracy, is that it means giving people the freedom to do as they please until it directly impinges upon my own freedom. You do your thing and leave me alone to do mine. Government exists to make sure no one steps on another's toes. The best government is the one which governs least. What is so marvelous for me about Dewey's view of democracy is that he turns my own view upside down. Whereas I have always thought of democracy as open competition in which the hardest workers get the best, personal

rewards, Dewey tells me the essence of democracy is community, and community means striving for a shared goal simply because it is shared; it means like mindedness, having common aims, knowledge, beliefs, and aspirations (*Democracy and Education*, p.4).

> **Wherever there is conjoint activity whose consequences are appreciated as good by all singular persons who take part in it, and where the realization of the good is such as to effect an energetic desire and effort to sustain it in being just because it is a good shared by all, there is in so far a community (*The Public & Its Problems*, p.149).**

Whereas my entire life program has been an effort to find personal satisfaction by reducing my dependence upon others, Dewey calls the idea of being able to stand and act alone "an unnamed form of insanity" (*Democracy and Education*, p.44). According to Dewey, all of the great modern advances-- in science, art, and education-- have been cooperative affairs. It is just that the fruits of these advances have been appropriated by a few for their private gain.

To conclude, I believe Dewey would say the causes of my lack of integration are two-fold. First, my approach to life is too weighted toward isolation, toward viewing my own happiness as independent of the happiness of others. Instead of seeing liberty as a chance to be free of all interference, Dewey would want me to see liberty as the chance to join in common cause, to adjust to and respect the unique contributions each member can make to a group purpose. Instead of dwelling on the joys of standing apart from others, Dewey would say it is time for me to emphasize the joys of working harmoniously in a group, building a common language, switching roles so I can share others' experiences.

Second, Dewey might say that I have been victimized by the consequences of professionalism. I think of my relationships to doctors and car mechanics and even to my department chair who couldn't care less about Dewey. In each of these relationships there is little common purpose, common language, or shared experience. Because so many of my relationships do not lead to community-- do not have the common aims, beliefs, and aspirations which are Dewey's conditions of community-- I despair and retreat from them.

As a result, and perhaps because I have more control over my

philosophy courses than other aspects of my life, I have been driven to experiment with my classroom, to turn it toward community by trying out Deweyan principles. For example, in order to honor student differences, to promote the interpenetration of different student lives, I make a place for student stories alongside the classroom texts. In order to share more responsibility with students and to promote common experiences, I encourage role-switching. I become apprentice by doing the course assignments along with my students, and I allow students to become teachers by letting them set the tone and agendas for class discussion. And, finally, to encourage integration of academic and non-school worlds, I push my students to write philosophic papers which focus on their own lives, on those issues which refuse to go away, which stamp their feet at the tips of their noses demanding attention. In sum, in my classroom I work to puncture the water-tight compartments which keep me from my students, which isolate my students from each other, and which separate philosophic discourse from everyday language.